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ABSTRACT

In this study, the nature of the home environment, the characteristics of the parent/child interaction, parents' childrearing orientations, and parents' self-descriptions were examined prior to divorce (while the families were still intact) and then again following divorce. The sample consisted of families recruited from an ongoing longitudinal study of children's ego and cognitive development initiated when subjects were 3 years old. Only those families in which parents had divorced after the first assessment were included in the sample. Family function was assessed when children were 3, 4, 6, and 12 years old. In general, results indicated that parental functioning declined in important ways years before divorce actually occurred. Before the divorce, mothers were unavailable emotionally and physically to their children and were more involved with their own careers and activities. After divorce, economic pressures and the competing demands of family and career on the mother combined to further depress the quality of life for children in single-parent homes. (MP)

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A prospective study of divorce and its relationship to family functioning

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A Prospective Study of Divorce and its Relation to Family Functioning

By the year 1990 it is projected that one-third of the children aged 18 in the United States will have lived with a divorced parent (Glick, 1979). Yet, the existing divorce literature leaves many important questions unanswered. Perhaps the principle shortcoming of the literature on divorce is the fact that it is entirely retrospective; it provides no insight into family interaction and the home environment before divorce occurs.

The divorce literature is also plagued by other serious methodological problems, including: non-random, self- selected samples, lack of objective measures, lack of independence in subject evaluation across time, and most importantly, lack of control groups of children from intact families for purposes of comparison.

This study attempts to respond to many of the methodological problems present in the divorce literature, but most importantly it aims to provide a prospective view of the impact of divorce on family functioning. Specifically, in this study the nature of the home environment, the characteristics of the parent-child interaction, the parents' child rearing orientations, and the parents' self- descriptions are examined prior to divorce, while the families were still intact, and then again post-divorce when the families are no longer intact.

Method

Subjects

The families included in the sample are participating in a longitudinal study of ego and cognitive development initiated when the children were 3-year-olds by Jeanne and Jack Block (Block & Block, 1980). The range of so-

cioeconomic and educational levels of the parents is wide.

In order to insure that the data analyzed are prospective with regard to divorce, families in which parents had divorced before the first assessment period are not included in the analysis. For each subsequent assessment, families in which the parents had divorced since the previous assessment were excluded from the analysis. Only when the children were twelve and thirteen-years old, when the data analyses are concurrent rather than prospective, were all the subjects included in the analysis.

Assessment of Family Functioning

The assessments of family functioning was accomplished using the following instruments:

1. The Child-rearing Practices Report. The CRPR is a 91-item Q-set (Harrington, Block, & Block, 1974; (Block, Block, & Morrison, 1981) developed for use by parents in describing their child-rearing orientations. The CRPR was completed by the mothers when the children were 3 1/2 and 12-years old.

2. The Self-descriptive Adjective Q-sort. The AQS, developed by Block and Block (Note 1), contains 43-items that represent, in adjective form, a broad range of behaviors which require minimal psychological inference. The AQS was completed by mothers to describe themselves and their spouses when the children were 6-years old and by both parents to describe themselves when the children were 12-years old.

3. Parental Teaching Strategies Q-sort. The TSQ, developed by Block and Block, was used to assess mother-child interaction in structured situations that emphasized maternal teaching strategies when the children were 4-years old. The TSQ consists of 45 items that cover a broad range of maternal socialization and teaching behaviors.

4. Family Interaction Q-sort. The FIQ (Gjerde, Block, & Block, Note 2) was used to describe mother-adolescent interaction when the children were 13-years old. The FIQ consists of 33 items that reflect important dimensions of parental behavior in essentially normal families.

5. The Environmental Q-sort. The EQS (Block, 1971) was developed to capture the relative salience of the familial circumstances in which a child develops, including the physical, social, and psychological aspects of the home.

Results

In this presentation, time permits us to only highlight some of the main results. More extensive descriptions of both the prospective and concurrent results can be found in the tables that have been made available. For each of the analyses to be presented, data were available at two points in time. The results at the earlier age are always prospective with regard to divorce, that is, families that subsequently divorced were compared with families that remained intact. The results at the later age are always concurrent with regard to divorce, that is, family functioning in divorced and intact families are compared.

The Relationship between Marital Status and Mothers' Descriptions of their Child-rearing Orientations

Table 1 shows the correlations between mothers' child-rearing orientations and marital status when the children were 3 and 12-years old.

Insert Table 1 about here

As seen in Table 1, strong gender-related results emerged in these ana-

lyses. Prior to divorce (age 3), relationships between marital status and child-rearing were most numerous for boys. The relationship of mothers who subsequently divorced and their preschool sons were difficult, distant, and conflicted several years prior to divorce. Mothers who eventually divorced favored strict discipline, physical punishment, and maintainance of self-control for their sons while they de-emphasized intimate warm mother-son relations.

Subsequent to divorce (age 12), relationships between marital status and child-rearing orientations were more numerous for mothers of girls. At this age, the mother-daughter relationship was described as distant and lacking in warmth. The mothers did not take their daughters preferences into account when making plans and, in fact, they found long periods with their daughters to be uninteresting.

The Relationship of Marital Status to Parental Self-description

Parents' self-descriptions and mothers' descriptions of fathers are shown in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

Mothers of 6-years old girls in families which eventually divorced, described themselves as being emotionally unavailable to their children as much as six years prior to the divorce. These mothers described themselves as more self-centered, non-approving, critical, and ambitious. Mothers of 6-year old boys from families that eventually divorced described themselves in more positive terms; they saw themselves sensitive and confident but as less creative and adventurous than mothers of boys in families that remained in-

tact.

When the children were 6-years old, mothers also described their spouses. Mothers of both girls and boys from families that eventually divorced described their husbands years before the divorce as irresponsible, inconsiderate, self-centered, stubborn, and even rebellious.

When the children were 12 years of age, mothers once again described themselves. Divorced mothers of girls, relative to married mothers of girls, viewed themselves as more disorderly, distractable, and sympathetic and as less helpful and creative. For boys, mothers' self-descriptions were essentially unrelated to marital status. It is interesting to note that divorced fathers of boys described themselves similarly to how they had been described by their spouses before the divorce, 6 years earlier; these fathers now described themselves as more rebellious, irresponsible, and as acting with less generosity and foresight than fathers from intact families.

The Relationship between Marital Status and Mother-child Interaction in Structured Situations.

When mothers and 4-year old children were observed in structured situations no differences emerged between mothers who eventually divorced and mothers who remained in intact families. Nine years later, striking differences emerged when mother-adolescent relationships were compared in divorced and intact families. These results are summarized in Table 3.

Insert Table 3 about here

Divorced mothers of girls, relative to married mothers of girls, were more responsive, accepting, egalitarian, and affectionate with their

daughters. Divorced mothers of young male adolescents were also seen as less critical, hostile, and rejecting of their sons than married mothers of the same-aged boys.

The Relationship between Marital Status and Environmental Quality.

The correlations between marital status and and environmental quality when the children were 6 and 12-years old are presented in Table 4.

Insert Table 4 about here

For girls, families that eventually divorced were characterized by a career-oriented mother who did not seem to enjoy her maternal role; she was active outside the home and emotionally unavailable to the child. These families were characterized years before the divorces by signs of instability. For boys, the quality of the environment was less strongly unrelated to subsequent divorce.

When the children were 12-years old, the environment of divorced and intact families were compared. The divorced mothers of girls were seen as brittle, vulnerable women with limited financial and emotional resources and having difficulties in managing the competing demands of family and career. These single parent families were unstable, disorderly, and characterized by little consideration of the needs of others. Several of the same Q-sort items were used to describe the home environments of single parent families of boys, but the magnitude of the relationships were generally lower.

Discussion

These results indicate that parental functioning declines in important

ways years before divorce actually occurs. Before the divorce, mothers are unavailable emotionally and physically to their children and more involved with their own careers and activities. After divorce, economic pressures, as well as the competing demands of family and career on the mother, combine to further depress the quality of life for children living in single parent homes.

One of the most common findings in the divorce literature is that boys are more vulnerable to the effects of divorce than girls. Boys' behavior after divorce has consistently been characterized by undercontrol of impulse and aggression (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1979). Recent data indicate that even before divorce occurs in a family, the boys are impulsive and undercontrolled (Morrison, Note 3). Consistent with this characterization of boys' behavior prior to divorce, the results of this study indicate that in subsequently divorcing families, the child rearing practices endorsed by mothers of boys are strikingly more severe than the child-rearing practices endorsed by mothers of girls. The problematic nature of the mother-son relationship post-divorce has been attributed to stresses inherent in the situation where the opposite sex parent, usually the mother, has custody of the child (Santrock & Warshak, 1979). The data from this study indicate, however, that the mother-son relationship is problematic years before divorce occurs, while the father is still nominally present.

After divorce, single mothers have a more egalitarian, less directive relationship with their children, especially with girls, than do mothers in intact families. This finding supports Weiss's (1979) theory that single parent households lack the power hierarchy present in two parent families. A relative lack of hierarchy may in part be the result of the single parents' prac-

tical need to share household responsibilities with their adolescent children.

Cantor (1979) reports that during the pre-separation period, parents typically believe that they are able to protect their children from the stress of an unstable family situation. The results of this study suggest that the pre-separation period can be stressful in important ways. Thus in order to approach a more complete understanding of the implications of divorce, it is important to look at families years before there is a divorce, while the family is still intact. Only longitudinal studies of unselected samples of families are likely to accomplish this aim.

Reference Notes

1. Block, J.H., & Block, J. The Self-descriptive Adjective Q-sort. (Available from Jack Block, Department of Psychology, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720.)

2. Gjerde, P.F., Block, J., & Block, J.H. The Family Interaction Q-sort. A set of Q-items for describing parental behaviors in essentially normal families. (Available from Jack Block or Per F. Gjerde, Department of Psychology, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720).

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Table 1

The Relationship between Divorce and Mothers' Child-Rearing Orientations

Girls	Boys	CRPR Item
		Age 3
.02	-.39***	Respects C opinions, encourages expression
-.19	-.39***	Puts wishes of mate before those of C
.27*	.32**	Often feels angry with C
.03	.54***	Wishes spouse were more interested in C
.06	.50***	Believes physical punishment best form of discipline
.03	-.43***	Thinks it good practice for C to perform for others
.10	-.30**	Takes C's preferences into account in making Family plans
-.11	-.33**	Feels C should have time to think/daydream/even loaf
.37***	-.09	Finds it difficult to punish C
.23	.39***	Doesn't allow C to say bad things about his teacher
-.26*	-.44***	Worries about bad/sad things happening as C grows up
-.13	.32**	Teaches C punishment will find him when he is bad
.36**	-.09	Doesn't blame C for outcome of others ask for trouble
.45***	.30**	Feels C is a bit of a disappointment to me
.14	-.45***	Is easy going and relaxed with C
-.09	-.46***	Parent and C have warm/intimate times together
-.21	-.30**	Encourages C to be curious/explore/question things
-.09	.44***	Uses supernatural forces/beings in explaining things to C
-.14	-.66***	Makes sure C knows attempts/accomplishments appreciated
.01	.38***	Teaches C to keep control of feelings at all times
-.12	.34**	Gives C extra privileges for good behavior
.09	.43***	Enjoys having the house full of children
.35**	.20	Good deal of conflict between parent and C
-.04	-.34**	Likes to have some time away from C
.30**	.16	Makes C aware of shame/disappointment at misbehavior
.20	-.30**	Wants C to make good impression on others
-.09	-.31**	Know where C is and what he is up to
-.13	.37***	C should be weaned from breast/bottle as soon as possible
.06	.60***	Thinks C must learn early not to cry
-.11	.30**	Doesn't want C to be seen as different from others
-.34**	-.23	Gets pleasure watching C eat well and enjoying food
.02	-.32**	Thinks it is wrong to insist young boys/girls have different kinds of toys/play different sorts of games

Girls	Boys	CRPR Item
		Age 12
.34**	.33*	Wishes spouse were more interested in C
.50***	.12	Tries to prevent rough games or other dangerous acts
-.36**	-.40***	Encourages C to wonder and think about life
-.52***	-.14*	Takes C's preferences into account in making plans
-.13	-.34**	Doesn't blame C for outcome if others ask for trouble
-.65***	-.29*	Parent and C have warm/intimate times together
-.04	-.35**	Encourages C to be curious/explore/question things
.42***	.05	Expects C to be grateful and appreciative of advantages
-.19	-.33**	Dreads answering C questions about sex
.38**	.01	Gives C extra privileges for good behavior
.11	-.36**	Teaches C he is responsible for what happens to him
.34**	.01	Worries about health of C
-.41**	.28	Likes to have some time away from C
-.35**	-.24	Finds long periods with C interesting and educational
-.50***	-.35**	Thinks it is wrong to insist young boys/girls have different kinds of toys/play different sorts of games

Note:
The number of subjects are 45 girls and 43 boys at age 3 and 34 girls and 38 boys at age 12.

** $p<.05$
*** $p<.01$

Table 3

The Relationship between Divorce and Mother-Child Interaction when the Children are 13

Girls	Boys	Family Interaction Q-sort Item
.36**	-.08	Mother appears to be responsive to child's needs, opinions and feelings
.36**	-.14	Mother tends to behave towards child in a seductive manner
.55**	.34**	Mother's behavior toward child tends to express an egalitarian, status-free relationship
-.41**	-.00	Mother tends to be critical, hostile, and rejecting of child's and ideas
.55**	.09	Mother appears to be aware of, and to be comfortable with child's sexuality
-.31	.33**	Mother appears to exclude the child from her interactions
.39**	-.10	Mother tends to show affection for child
-.63***	-.31*	Mother tends to be evaluative and judgemental regarding child via words, gestures, or action
-.49***	-.14	Mother tends to enforce directives or in other ways insist upon compliance
.40**	.09	Mother tends to encourage individuality and independence of action and opinion in child

Note:
The number of subjects are 29 girls and 35 boys.

** $p<.05$
*** $p<.01$

Table 2

The Relationship between Divorce and Parents' Descriptions of Self and Spouse

Girls	Boys	Mothers' Self-descriptions
		Age 6
.45**	.32	Competent
.38**	-.03	Talkative
.34*	.09	Self-centered
.33*	.25	Non-approving
.36*	.07	Critical
.33*	.33	Excitable
.37*	-.26	Calm
.38*	.02	Likes to do well
-.27	.40*	Considerate
-.10	-.38*	Creative
.09	.36*	Sensitive
-.01	.35*	Confident
.15	-.36*	Adventurous

Girls	Boys	Mothers' Descriptions of Spouses
		Age 6
-.49**	-.52**	Considerate
-.65**	-.24	Generous
.36*	-.31	Mischievous
-.51**	-.30	Helpful
-.36*	-.29	Sympathetic
.40*	-.12	Self-centered
-.41*	-.06	Trusting
-.37*	-.31	Affectionate
.33*	.05	Assertive
.40*	.35*	Talkative
.43**	.47**	Stubborn
-.37*	-.38*	Responsible
.39*	-.39*	Restless
.16	-.54**	Reasonable
.13	.47**	Rebellious
.15	.50**	Not approving
-.18	.45**	Show off

-.27	-.44*	Cheerful
-.15	-.40*	Playful
-.14	-.40*	Sensible
.02	-.39*	Confident
-.06	-.36*	Calm

Girls	Boys	Mothers' Self-descriptions
		Age 6
.45	.17	Worrying
-.43**	-.46**	Orderly, neat
.46**	-.31	Distractible
-.51**	-.31	Creative
-.54**	.01	Helpful
.37*	-.06	Sympathetic
.37	.24	Affectionate
-.36	.10	Reasonable
.37	.14	Easily upset

Girls	Boys	Fathers' Self-descriptions
		Age 12
.26	.49**	Rebellious
.07	-.48**	Foresightful
.07	-.46*	Responsible
-.20	-.42*	Generous
-.16	.45	Show off
.14	-.46	Sensible

Note:
The numbers of subject are 37 girls and 31 boys at age 6 and 31 girls and 32 boys at age 12.

* $p<.05$
** $p<.01$

Table 4

The Relationship between Divorce and Environmental Quality

Girls	Boys	Environmental Q-sort Item
		Age 6
.41**	.29	Mother is career oriented for herself
-.45**	-.25	Mother is available to child
-.44**	-.07	Family seems stable, permanent
.47**	.20	Mother is constructively active outside home
-.31*	-.12	Mother seems to enjoy maternal role
-.31*	-.16	Mother emphasizes culture and arts
-.32*	.16	Opportunities for child to play outdoors
.33*	-.05	Family emphasizes conformity
-.12	-.39*	Mother seems indulgent of child
.17	-.36*	Mother teases and is playfully contradictory
		Age 12
-.65**	.03	House and grounds appear to be well-maintained
-.67**	-.24	Family seems stable, permanent
-.57**	-.08	Home environment structured, orderly and predictable
-.51**	-.35*	Family atmosphere of consideration of needs of others
-.56**	-.30*	Mother effectively manages competing demands
.59**	.25	Mother seems neurotic, brittle, anxious
-.48**	.13	Opportunities for child to play outdoors
-.58**	-.29	Mother appears to be an educated woman
.45**	.31*	Mother discourages child's steps toward independence and maturity
.68**	.47**	Family is beset by misfortune
.52**	.50**	Child may be subjected to discrimination
-.62**	-.35*	Financial condition of family appears comfortable
.55**	.32	Mothers limitations, needs, vulnerabilities are apparent
-.59**	-.35*	Child is experiencing a sophisticated, complex home
.48**	.16	Mother's interpersonal modes induce conflict in children
.48**	.30	Mother is manifestly long suffering
-.39*	-.36*	Mother appears to be respected in community
-.35*	.04	House is ornate
.39*	.44**	Child experiences cultural conflicts
.41*	-.20	Home situation is child oriented

Girls	Boys	Environmental Q-sort Item
-.41*	-.22	Mother emphasizes culture and arts
-.25	-.36*	Mother is constructively active outside home
-.01	.43**	Mother is authoritarian
-.55**	-.39*	Mother emphasizes intellectual orientation
.26	.60**	Relatives play role in child's socialization

Note:
The number of subjects are 42 girls and 33 boys at age 6 and 33 girls and 38 boys at age 12.

*p<.05
**p<.01